

Introduced by Senator Escutia

March 14, 2005

Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 32—Relative to César Chávez Day.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

SCR 32, as introduced, Escutia. César Chávez Day.

This measure would recognize March 31 as the anniversary of the birth of César Chávez, and would call upon all Californians to participate in appropriate observances to remember César Chávez as a symbol of hope and justice to all persons.

Fiscal committee: no.

1 WHEREAS, On March 31, 1927, a true hero named César
2 Estrada Chávez was born in Yuma, Arizona to Librado and Juana
3 Chávez and became the second oldest in a family of five
4 children. César Chávez lived his life dedicated to improving the
5 plight of farmworkers through struggle, sacrifice, and self-denial.
6 He founded and led the first successful farmworkers' union in
7 United States history. He stood for dignity and justice for
8 farmworkers. Today, he remains a symbol of hope to all
9 Californians who find hope and peace in justice; and
10 WHEREAS, In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, César
11 Chávez' father lost his small farming business and the family
12 went broke. The family became migrant workers and joined
13 some 30,000 workers who followed the crops from Arizona into
14 southern California, then up the length of the central valley and
15 back again, picking everything from peas to cotton. They lived in
16 tents and other makeshift housing that often lacked a bathroom,
17 electricity, or running water. Schooling for Chávez was irregular
18 and haphazard. He attended some 30 different schools, often

1 encountered discrimination, and was punished for speaking
2 Spanish; and

3 WHEREAS, After graduation from the eighth grade, César
4 Chávez was forced to quit school and take to the fields in order to
5 help support his family. In 1944, at the age of 17, César Chávez
6 joined the Navy and served in World War II. After he completed
7 his tour of duty, César Chávez returned to California and married
8 Helen Fabela, a woman who shared his dedication to the cause of
9 the farmworker. They lived in San Jose in a tough Mexican
10 neighborhood called “Sal Si Puedes” which translates to “get out
11 if you can,” and together raised eight children; and

12 WHEREAS, As a farmworker, César Chávez experienced
13 firsthand the injustice of working long hours with little pay.
14 Instilled with a sense of justice passed down from his mother,
15 César Chávez made a decision to speak up and fight for change.
16 He took part in his first strike in protest of low wages and poor
17 working conditions for farmworkers. Although initially
18 unsuccessful, his participation in that first strike was to mark the
19 beginning of a long career in which he fought for improved
20 working and living conditions for farmworkers; and

21 WHEREAS, In 1952, César Chávez met Fred Ross who was
22 with a group called the Community Services Organization
23 (CSO). Struck by César Chávez’ engaging personality and
24 leadership qualities, Ross tapped César Chávez to head voter
25 registration efforts where he successfully registered 4,000 voters.
26 The following year, he led organizational efforts to establish
27 CSO offices in every major barrio. César Chávez eventually
28 spent 10 years with CSO, and became general director in 1958.
29 During this time, services were expanded to include citizenship
30 classes, helping members secure driver’s licenses, assistance in
31 filling out applications for aid, and securing legal counsel; and

32 WHEREAS, In 1962, César Chávez resigned his position with
33 the CSO to embark on a bold new undertaking to form a
34 farmworkers’ union. He was joined by the great Dolores Huerta,
35 and together they became the architects of the National Farm
36 Worker’s Union, the forerunner to the present United Farm
37 Workers (UFW); and

38 WHEREAS, In 1965, César Chávez led a strike of California
39 grapepickers to demand higher wages, and urged all Americans
40 to boycott table grapes as a show of support. The strike included

1 a 340-mile march from Delano to Sacramento in 1966 in which
2 thousands of farmworkers and supporters marched in solidarity.
3 The farmworkers and supporters carried banners with the black
4 eagle with the words “HUELGA” (strike) and “VIVA LA
5 CAUSA” (long live our cause); and

6 WHEREAS, César Chávez preached nonviolence to the
7 strikers even as they were physically abused by many of those
8 opposed to the grape boycott. In 1968, he began a Ghandi-like
9 fast to call attention to the migrant workers’ cause. Although his
10 dramatic act did little to solve the immediate problem, it
11 increased public awareness of the conditions under which
12 farmworkers labored. In 1973, the UFW organized a strike for
13 higher wages from lettuce growers, and, after many battles, an
14 agreement was finally reached in 1977 that gave the UFW the
15 sole right to organize farmworkers; and

16 WHEREAS, During the 1980s, César Chávez led the effort to
17 call attention to the health problems of farmworkers caused by
18 the use of certain pesticides on crops; and

19 WHEREAS, On April 23, 1993, César Estrada Chávez died
20 peacefully in his sleep in San Luis, Arizona. During his funeral,
21 Cardinal Roger M. Mahoney, who celebrated the funeral mass,
22 called César Chávez “a special prophet for the world’s
23 farmworkers”; and

24 WHEREAS, Many declared that the UFW would die without
25 him, but on César Chávez’ birthday, March 31, 1994, under the
26 leadership of his son-in-law, Arturo Rodriquez, the UFW
27 marched 343 miles from Delano to Sacramento, echoing César
28 Chávez’ historic 1966 march, and demonstrated that the UFW
29 still worked for farmworkers; and

30 WHEREAS, In 1990, Mexican President Salinas de Gortari
31 awarded César Chávez, the “El Aguila Azteca” (the Aztec
32 Eagle), Mexico’s highest award presented to people of Mexican
33 heritage who have made major contributions outside of Mexico.
34 He also became the second Mexican American to receive the
35 Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the
36 United States, which was presented posthumously to his wife,
37 Helen Chávez, and their children on August 8, 1994, by President
38 William Jefferson Clinton; and

39 WHEREAS, In 1994, César Chávez’ family and the officers of
40 the UFW created the César E. Chávez Foundation to inspire

1 current and future generations by promoting the ideals of César
2 Chávez’ life, work, and vision. Communities throughout
3 California and the United States have honored the memory of
4 César Chávez by naming schools, parks, children’s centers,
5 streets, and other public works after the leader; and

6 WHEREAS, César Chávez led by example, giving of himself
7 so that he might help others. His relentless pursuit of the belief
8 that the American dream should be available to all Americans,
9 regardless of race or national origin, stands as a monument to our
10 free society. His life and work is not only an inspiration to
11 Latinos, but to working Americans of all nationalities. His legacy
12 lives on in the improved working and living conditions of
13 hundreds of thousands of Californians and their families; and

14 WHEREAS, In the year 2000, the Legislature enacted Senate
15 Bill 984 (Chapter 213 of the Statutes of 2000) to create an annual
16 state holiday on César Chávez’ birthday, March 31. This holiday
17 provides all Californians the opportunity to learn from César
18 Chávez’ life and provides schoolchildren the opportunity to learn
19 through community service; and

20 WHEREAS, The State Board of Education on Wednesday,
21 February 6, 2002, adopted a model curriculum on the life and
22 work of César Chávez, fulfilling a key provision of Chapter 213
23 of the Statutes of 2000, that also includes topics on pesticides,
24 immigration, and agriculture’s role in the economy; now,
25 therefore, be it

26 *Resolved by the Senate of the State of California, the Assembly*
27 *thereof concurring*, That the Legislature recognizes March 31 as
28 the anniversary of the birth of César Chávez, and calls upon all
29 Californians to participate in appropriate observances to
30 remember César Chávez as a symbol of hope and justice to all
31 persons; and be it further

32 *Resolved*, That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of
33 this resolution to the author for appropriate distribution.